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# Myth 7: Differentiation in the Regular Classroom Is Equivalent to Gifted Programs and Is Sufficient

## Classroom Teachers Have the Time, the Skill, and the Will to Differentiate Adequately

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Differentiation of instruction calls on a teacher to recognize that the students in his or her classroom differ from one another in a variety of ways—including readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles—and to respond to these differences with learning experiences matched to demonstrated individual student need (Tomlinson, 2003). This approach to teaching stands in stark contrast to approaches that assume that all students in a classroom, regardless of its heterogeneity, benefit and learn from a standard, one-size-fits-all curriculum.

Within the philosophy of differentiation, gifted students are regarded as a diverse lot whose individual talents and needs cannot be met with a single “gifted” curriculum. As such, recommendations for differentiating learning experiences for gifted students include principles of providing not only challenges generally considered beneficial for gifted students (e.g., greater depth and complexity, adjusted pace, greater independence) but also curricular and instructional modifications geared toward individual student need.

Taken at face value, the philosophy of differentiated instruction is hard to argue with—who wouldn’t agree that students learn more efficiently and effectively when learning tasks are geared toward their individual needs? Who wouldn’t agree that differentiating the curriculum in a mixed-ability classroom isn’t beneficial to the gifted students in that classroom, most of who are used to, in the words of Sally Reis et al. (1993), waiting until January to learn anything new?

It comes as no surprise, then, that many school districts across the country have decided to eliminate or cut back on more traditional gifted programs in favor of differentiation of curriculum and instruction in the

regular classroom. In many ways, meeting the needs of gifted students through differentiation of curriculum and instruction within the regular classroom seems a perfect solution to the issues that have plagued gifted education for many years and remain largely unresolved: problems with inequities in identification (in a differentiated classroom, “identification” of student need is not a onetime event but an ongoing process of assessment tied to specific classroom goals), the need for an “in” or “out” mentality (space is not limited in the regular classroom), issues with pull-out gifted programs that are only a “part-time solution to a full-time problem” (students continually receive services matched to their needs when learning experiences are differentiated in the regular classroom), issues with how to define giftedness (assessing student strengths and needs can be flexible in a differentiated classroom, determined on a task-by-task basis), and the costs associated with gifted programs (it doesn’t cost any more—in dollars at least—to differentiate instruction in the regular classroom than to teach a one-size-fits-all curriculum). So why *is* it a myth that differentiated instruction in the regular classroom is an appropriate substitute for gifted programs?

In truth, it shouldn’t be a myth. Classrooms should be places where teachers uncover and foster talent in *all* students by finding pathways into content through students’ interests and ways to scaffold learning so that rich, high-level concepts are accessible. They should

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be places where students who excel in a certain area or areas confront continual challenge and opportunities to grow and where appropriate curriculum is not determined by a label affixed to a student but by a teacher's knowledge of the unique strengths, interests, learning preferences, and needs of that child.

But the reality is that the way we "do school" does not make it easy for classrooms to be places where individual student needs, rather than pressure to pass a standardized test, ultimately shape the curriculum. Although differentiation and state standards can peacefully coexist in a classroom (see Tomlinson, 2000), teachers often find it difficult to reconcile attending to student differences with a broader high-stakes testing culture that seems to mandate the opposite. Recent research indicates that the high-stakes testing associated with *No Child Left Behind* has rendered the regular classroom even less hospitable to gifted learners than it was previously, causing teachers to resort to drill-and-kill techniques over more student-centered approaches (e.g., Moon, Brighton, & Callahan, 2003).

Many teachers also seem resistant to differentiation because they perceive it as highly time consuming. It does take longer to plan thoughtful differentiated units and lessons than to present a one-size-fits-all curriculum. Of course, the amount of time it takes to plan differentiated curriculum decreases over time as teachers become more accustomed to the process, learn to plan efficiently, and develop a storehouse of differentiated lessons and units from which to work. But the initial planning is off-putting to many teachers, causing them to write differentiation off as unrealistic or to differentiate only for the students who they perceive need it most.

Unfortunately, research indicates that teachers in heterogeneous classrooms tend *not* to include gifted students in the group of students they believe most need differentiation. Westberg, Archambault, Dobyns, and Salvin (1993) found that little differentiation in the instructional and curricular practices of teachers was provided for high-ability learners in regular classrooms, an issue confirmed by Westberg and Daoust (2004). When teachers do differentiate, they tend to focus their efforts on the more struggling learners in the classroom, believing that gifted students do not "need" differentiation (Brighton, Hertberg, Callahan, Tomlinson, & Moon, 2005).

Misunderstandings about differentiation—that it is a form of scaffolding for struggling learners rather than a method of meeting the unique needs of all levels of learners, that it is primarily a group work strategy, that it is about providing fun choices rather than a

thoughtful, concept-based curriculum—are prevalent in teachers new to differentiation and can lead to practices such as using gifted learners as anchors in group work to "make sure work gets done," using gifted students to help tutor other children, or sacrificing high-level content for cute activities. These and other early misuses of differentiation can actually make the regular classroom a *less* challenging place for gifted learners, pointing to the need for thoughtful ongoing professional development to make differentiation a viable option for educating gifted students. Although the literature on teacher change very clearly indicates that meaningful change requires sustained focus and long-term professional development (Fullan, 1993), most teachers expected to differentiate instruction receive little training or support beyond a single one-day, whole-school workshop. Clearly, such drive-by professional development experiences are not sufficient to do the complex and multifaceted work of dramatically changing the way teachers conceive of teaching and learning or altering their beliefs about who, in the end, are the students on whom their limited resources should be expended.

It is also unrealistic to assume that every teacher is appropriately trained to be the sole in-school guide of a gifted student's education for a year. In all but one state, nothing beyond a cursory glance at the needs of gifted students is required to prepare teachers to teach in the regular classroom (Starko, 2008). The limited research on the effectiveness of teachers with training in gifted education suggests that gifted education coursework affects teachers' effectiveness in matching curriculum and instruction to the needs of their most able learners (Robinson, 2008). Additionally, to differentiate curriculum in meaningful ways for all students, and in particular for gifted learners, teachers need a deep understanding of the scope and sequence, big ideas, resources, and unanswered questions of a discipline. This is a particularly tall order for elementary school teachers, who are responsible for content spanning numerous disciplines.

For all these reasons—lack of sustained teacher training in the specific philosophy and methods of differentiation, underlying beliefs prevalent in our school culture that gifted students do fine without any adaptations to curriculum, lack of general education teacher training in the needs and nature of gifted students, and the difficulty of differentiating instruction without a great depth of content knowledge—it does not seem that we are yet at a place where differentiation within the regular classroom is a particularly effective method of challenging our most able learners.

Two dangers seem inherent in writing an article claiming that it is a myth that differentiation is a sufficient approach to educating the gifted. It may appear to be advocating for abandoning differentiation of instruction entirely or to be advocating for a strict educational diet of ability-grouped classes. Neither of these is intended. Differentiation of instruction both within the regular classroom and within homogeneous settings is critical to addressing the needs of all high-ability learners, including twice-exceptional students, underachievers, students from underserved populations, and highly gifted students. Differentiation has been shown, even in small doses, to have an impact on student achievement and attitudes toward learning (Brighton et al., 2005). It has the potential to be a powerful tool for fostering the talents of gifted students who are readily identifiable and unlocking the talents of gifted students who are not. But, like any approach to educating gifted students, it functions best as a critical component within a spectrum of services provided for high-ability learners.

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